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Noel Beddoe makes a brave exploration of contested terrain.

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The Yalda Crossing Review -  
Rohan Wilson.

Noel Beddoe's new novel seems to pose one fraught, urgent question to the nation: how are settler-Australians supposed to deal with the inheritance of shame and dishonour resulting from the Aboriginal dispossession? It is not easily answered, nor even easily asked. Do we put it out of our minds? Or face up to it? Beddoe has most certainly chosen the latter, and this novel is the product of his decision.

Whether you agree with Beddoe's outlook or not, it is hard to deny that a great many Australians feel precisely as he does. In fiction, this emotional territory has been well charted of late, most notably by Kate Grenville, whose book *The Secret River* remains the most glass-clear portrayal of the kind of sentiments for which Beddoe also strives. But Beddoe goes further than Grenville in his scrutiny of the rightness or wrongness of these feelings, using his narrative to test the various moral defences we might offer up against the claim that, as his protagonist Young James Beckett says, 'the wish to belong drives us into the following of others, who may themselves be stupid, or cowardly, or be scarred and ruthless, and taking us into places without honour'.

The Yalda Crossing of the title is contested country, both part of the Wiradjuri nation and coveted by the late-coming whites. From the outset, violence feels inevitable. The Becketts – Young James and his father, the ex-soldier Captain Beckett – assemble a party with the intention of claiming the land at the Yalda Crossing. With them are the Captain's new wife, Harriette, and her daughter, Emily. They settle, build a homestead, and are brought, slowly, irretrievably, into conflict with the owners of the land, the Wiradjuri.

If this all sounds familiar, that's because it is. The great, honed archetypes that Beddoe is working with, the basic shapes of Australian history, account for much of the narrative detail. But the ways in which he interlocks his characters, the tensions he reveals, the secrets, all bring new insight to the proceedings. In particular, the startling ways in which each one reacts to the possibility of violence, their levels of acceptance, even of support, portray effectively the inner workings of these people. Beddoe constructs a tragedy that, while rolling ahead to its only possible conclusion, nonetheless still manages to convince us that the violence of settlement was always the result of a lack of humane leadership and was always, therefore, preventable.

Like Grenville before him, Beddoe's Aboriginal characters are largely silent. Their world is relayed to us through Lancaster, the scout responsible for guiding the settlement party to the Yalda Crossing. Lancaster has an affinity with the Wiradjuri and has comprehensive knowledge of their systems and beliefs. We come to them only through him, but as such never really get at them. Because of this, Indigineity feels more an object of study for the reader than a lived experience, and, just as Young James Beckett observes the Wiradjuri and tries, with the help of Lancaster, to understand how they live, white readers coming to *The Yalda Crossing* will feel distanced from them and forced into interpretation.

To my mind, this raises several questions fundamental to any project of this nature. Should white writers be attempting to insert an Indigenous perspective into their fiction, in order to bring Indigenous culture closer? Or should they, like Grenville and Beddoe, provide only an observational point of view? Either way, white writers will invariably come under criticism, for silencing black voices on the one hand, or for domesticating them on the other. It is this dichotomy that has led some critics into ill-considered remarks, such as this myopic gem from Alison Ravenscroft: 'to let the story of the Australian past, present and future be rewritten, white Australians will need to relinquish the position of novelist and historian, for now, in favour of the position of reader of Indigenous-signed textualities'.

Critics like Ravenscroft misunderstand the constitution of what Beddoe, Grenville, McGahan, Flanagan, and many others have been doing recently, and that is, acknowledging the fact that, for them, an inheritance of shame and dishonour comes with being a settler-Australian. Sometimes that shame is felt so deeply that a moment comes when they must act. In taking up a pen and writing, Beddoe has acted. Indigenous writers also act, but in different ways and for different reasons. Surely there is room for both? Surely, in an era of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, white Australians can speak without fear of drowning out Indigenous voices?

Beddoe has produced a brave, insightful, and important novel, one that takes a position and, whether you agree with that position or not, explores it fully and convincingly. Let's hope there are many more like it to come.